



A Day in Tuscany

Italy: beautiful, friendly, relaxed, spectacular! In June of 2001, my youngest daughter Audrey and I spent three weeks there. What an incredible experience it was! We loved the country, the people, the art, and the food. It was our first visit to Italy and we traveled by train to the cities of Milan, Florence, Siena, Rome, and Venice.

I wish I had kept a notebook about our daily experiences. This paper will be an account of our most favorite day in Italy, reconstructed with some names and details missing but, hopefully, conveying the delights of one terrific day in Tuscany.

It was our intention to travel about Italy strictly by train, without the headaches of driving a car. Anyone who has witnessed the Italian style of city driving will appreciate why this seemed like a good idea. It would be a perfect arrangement everywhere but around the city of Siena. Siena sits on top of a hill and the main square is for pedestrians only. Everything in this lovely city is accessible on foot. However, Siena is in Tuscany and the rolling hills and small towns of this area are a “must see” for every traveler to Italy.

It appeared that the solution to this problem would be to have someone else drive us around. An Internet search revealed a Web site for Tours Around Tuscany. There



Audrey and Gianni

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Gianni took us to a special café in a tiny town for lunch. He chose it because of the raviolis that were made fresh there each morning. We ate outside on a terrace, overlooking the beautiful countryside. The raviolis were delicious and the local wine perfect.

were three itineraries listed, all of which sounded terrific. My e-mail to the company was responded to by a man named Gianni. I'm sure that his last name was in the many e-mails we exchanged, but unfortunately I don't recall it. The tour was arranged with a day, time, and meeting place. No advanced deposit was required and, as it turned out, money was not mentioned until the tour came to a close. Any American who has been to Italy would understand this relaxed and trusting approach to paying for a service, but to someone who hadn't experienced the "Italian way" this seemed amazing.

Siena was a quaint town that we visited after three days in lovely Florence. We were booked for three days in the Hotel Duomo, a bed and breakfast recommended by author and travel advisor Rick Steves. On our second

day there, we walked to the pre-arranged meeting place to meet our tour guide. What we expected was a small van from the Tours Around Tuscany group. We were surprised to find a young man and his small Fiat waiting for us. It was Gianni himself in his own car, ready to show us Tuscany. We abandoned the Americans' tendency toward caution and climbed aboard for what would be a day to remember, an experience of a lifetime.

Gianni turned out to not only be a college graduate, a financial advisor, and a Web designer, but an expert on all things Italian. He knew about Italian art, history, culture, traditions, government, and certainly all things Tuscan. He spoke perfect English, was a careful and thoughtful driver, and had a wonderful sense of humor.

The day was warm and sunny and the tour schedule was as flexible as were we. As I mentioned before, I wish I had written down the names of each small town, but Montalcino, Pienza, Montepulciano, Bagno Vignoni, San Quirico d'Orcia and the monastery of Monte Oliveto Maggiore were the probable places we visited. I won't describe them in order, but will try to

Every village had flowers and flags



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provide some highlights of the day.

Each small town had a few things in common: at least one church/duomo, flowers in every window box, regional flags on display everywhere, hilly cobbled streets, and medieval architecture.

Pienza was a delightful village whose intimate little center was almost completely re-designed by Pope Pius II. Pienza was his birthplace. The Florentine architect and sculptor, Bernardo Rossellino, was commissioned to build a cathedral, papal palace, and town hall, all completed in 1462. The arcaded courtyard at the rear of the palace provided a fabulous panorama of the Orcia valley. The airy duomo next door was built on the edge of a hill and, from the start, was in danger of tumbling down the hillside. When we walked inside, it was filled with local residents attending services. Six altarpieces of the Madonna and Child added to the magnificent interior.

A group from a local contrade



The monastery of Monte Oliveto Maggiore

I expressed an interest in buying some local wine and cheese for my husband back in California. Gianni took us into a small and fragrant store with rounds of cheese and bottles of wine. I should have taken a photograph. It was so picturesque! Gianni was, again, a wealth of information. He explained about the different cheeses and wines and recommended some good choices for our purchase.

The Tuscan countryside looks similar to Sonoma County, except for the red and ochre-tinted shades of ancient buildings. There are vineyards and olive trees, hamlets and farmhouses, as well as fortified villas and castles. Slender cypress trees planted in neat rows add a touch of formal elegance to the landscape. Gianni pointed out that, in earlier times, graves were marked by the planting of three cypress trees in a group. We observed a number of these groupings during the day.

In Siena, we were lucky to observe parades of men, young and old, in the traditional costumes of their local neighborhoods, or contrade. They waved the same flags we had seen in the small towns. Each neighborhood had its own particular flag. Gianni explained the love of contrada that the Tuscians have and how the parades are a pre-cursor to Siena's Palio, a summer horse race around the campo, or town square. It is a famous race that many people from around the world attend and it was a treat to have Gianni explain the local passion and friendly competition involved in the event. Siena looks medieval and the pre-Palio parades gave us a feel for the pageantry, passions, dress, and loyalties of medieval society.

No trip to Tuscany would be complete without a visit to a monastery. Gianni took us to Monte Oliveto Maggiore, hidden among the cypress trees. The Olivetos are a congregation of Benedictine Order founded in 1313.



The frescos of Monte Oliveto Maggiore

Immediately inside the church is a courtyard filled with sunlight. Along the walls are 36 frescos depicting the life of St. Benedict. Gianni's knowledge of each fresco was astonishing. We followed him as he explained each scene and gave the beautiful artwork real meaning. It was an extraordinary experience. Inside the church were beautiful stained glass windows and paintings. Gianni explained the vow of silence that the monks take and described a bit of what their lives in the monastery are like.

Gianni was a tireless tour guide, but his two charges eventually ran out of steam. He suggested a visit to another hillside town and we had to confess to our exhaustion. I only wish I could visit that next town right now.

Tours around Tuscany and the amazing Gianni brought a part of this beautiful region to life for Audrey and I. Sometimes the best travel experiences are obtained by serendipity. Thank goodness for the Internet and thank goodness for Gianni and Tours Around Tuscany.

“Renowned for its art, history, and evocative landscape, Tuscany is a region where the past and present merge in pleasant harmony. Hill towns gaze across the countryside from on high, many encircled by Etruscan walls and slender cypress trees. Handsome palaces testify to the region's wealth, and medieval town halls indicate a long-standing tradition of democracy and self-government.” Eyewitness Travel Guides: Italy.